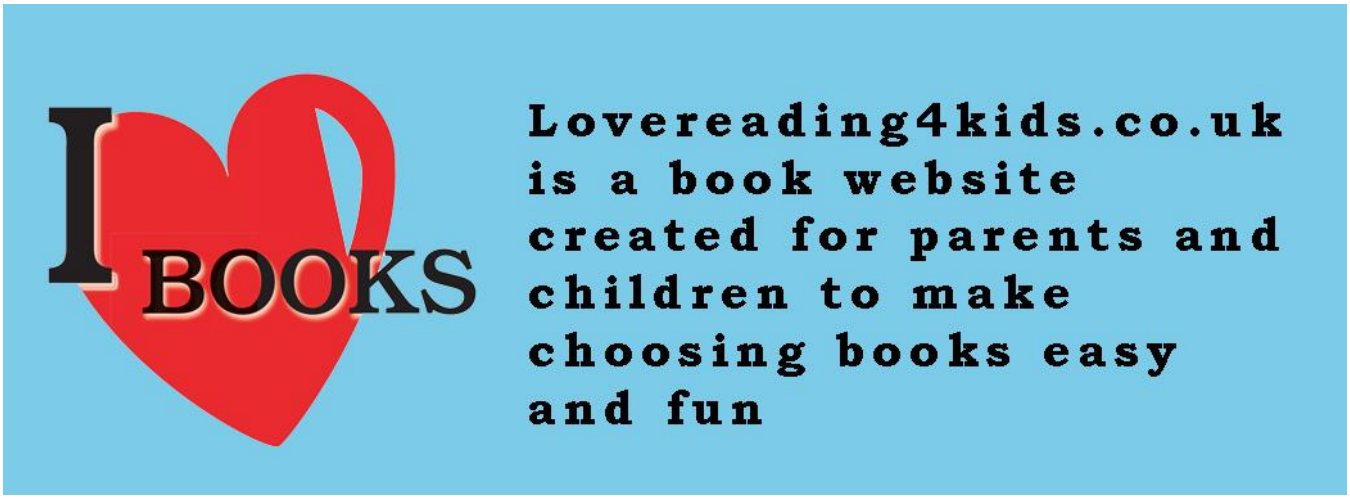

Opening extract from

Reckless I: The Petrified Flesh

Written by

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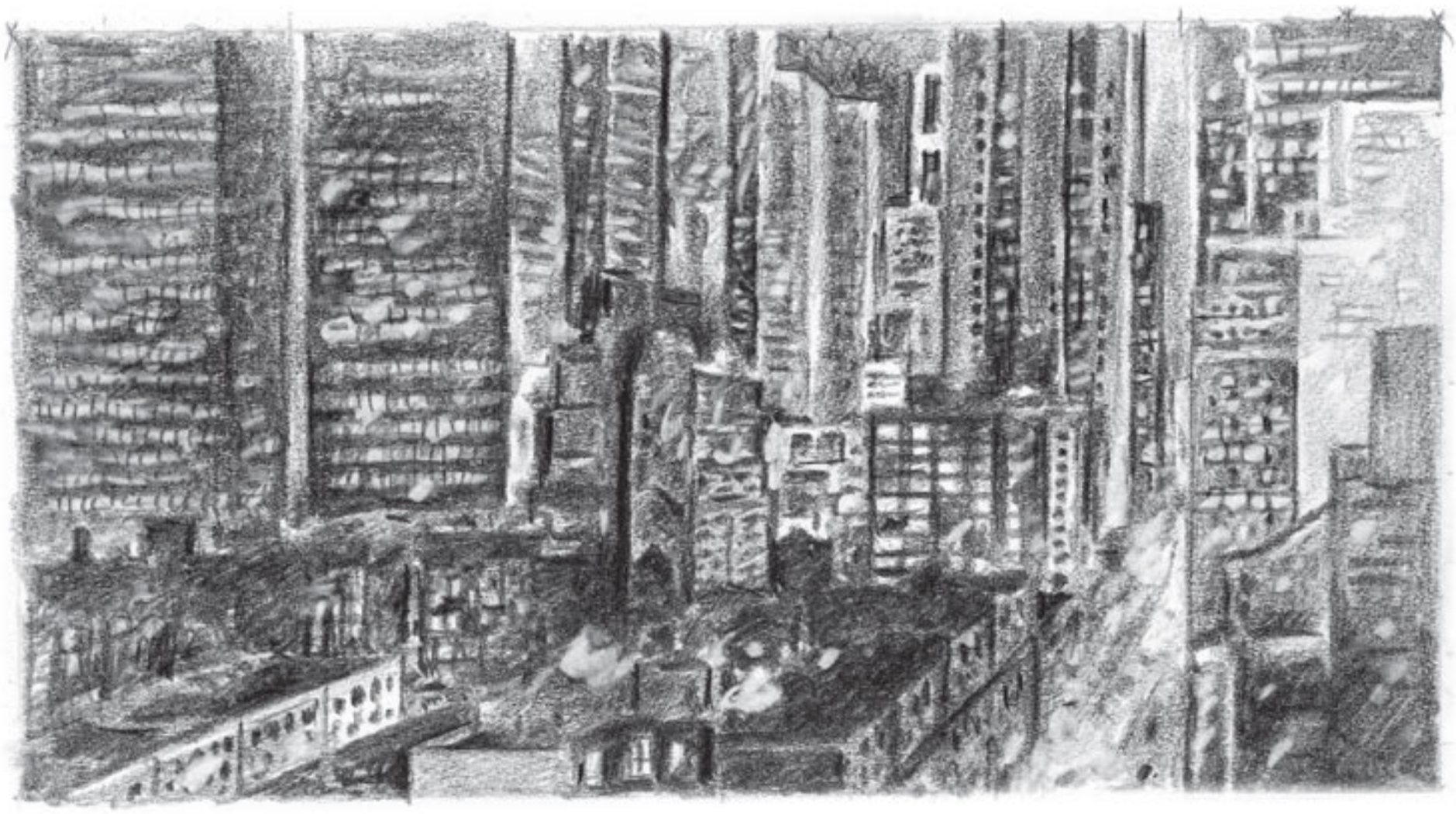

1

Once Upon a Time

The night was breathing in the apartment like a dark animal. The ticking of a clock, the groan of a floorboard when Jacob slipped out of his room… everything drowned in its silence. But Jacob loved the night. It was like a black cloak woven from freedom and danger, its darkness filling the rooms with the whisper of forgotten stories, of people who had lived in them long before he and his brother were born. The Kingdom… that's what Will had named the apartment they called home, probably inspired by the yellowed pages of their grandfather's fairy-tale books filled with German words and images of castles and peasant houses that looked so different from the skyscrapers and apartment blocks outside. It had been easy to convince Will that the apartment was enchanted because it had seven rooms and was on the seventh floor.

Two years ago Jacob had even made him believe that the whole building had been built by a Giant who lived in the basement. He could make Will believe anything.

Outside the stars were paled by the glaring lights of the city, and inside the large apartment was stale with their mother's sorrow. For Jacob sadness smelled like his mother's perfume, which defined the vast rooms as much as the faded photographs in the hallway and the old-fashioned furniture and wallpaper.

As usual she did not wake when Jacob stole into her room. They had fought once again, and for a moment he yearned to caress her sleeping face. Sometimes he dreamed of finding something that would wipe all that sadness off her face—an enchanted handkerchief or a glove that enabled his fingers to paint a smile onto her lips. It wasn't just Will who had spent too many afternoons listening to their grandfather's tales.

Jacob opened the drawer of his mother's nightstand. The key lay under the pills that let her sleep. You again? It seemed to mock him when he took it out. Foolish boy. Do you nourish the hope that one day I'll unlock more than an empty room for you?

Maybe. At the age of twelve one could still imagine such miracles.

There was still a light burning in Will's room—his brother was afraid of the dark. Will was afraid of many things in contrast to his older brother. Jacob made sure he was fast asleep before he unlocked the door of their father's study. His mother hadn't opened it since his disappearance more than a year ago, but Jacob couldn't count the times he had sneaked into the empty room to search for the answers she didn't want to give.

The room was untouched as if John Reckless had last sat in his desk chair less than an hour ago. The sweater he had worn so often still hung over the chair, and a used tea-bag was desiccating on a plate next to his calendar, which still showed the last year.

Come back! Jacob wrote with his finger on the fogged-up window, on the dusty desk, and on the glass panels of the cabinet that held the antique pistols his father had collected. But the room remained silent—and empty. He was twelve and no longer had a father.

Vanished.

As if he had never existed. As if he had been nothing but one of the childish stories Jacob and Will made up. Jacob kicked at the drawers he had searched in vain for so many nights, drowning in the helpless rage he felt each time he saw his father's empty chair in front of the desk. Gone. He yanked the books and magazines from their dusty shelves and tore down the model airplanes hanging above the desk, ashamed at how proudly he had painted them with red and white varnish.

Come back! He wanted to scream it through the streets that cut their gleaming paths through the city blocks seven stories below, scream it at the thousand windows that punched squares of light into the night. But instead he just stood between the shelves listening to his own heartbeat, so loud in the silent room.

The sheet of paper slipped out of a book on airplane propulsion. Jacob only picked it up because he thought he recognized his father's handwriting, though he quickly realized his error. Symbols and equations, a sketch of a peacock, a sun, two moons. None of it made any sense. Except for the one sentence he spotted on the reverse side:

The mirror will open only for he who cannot see himself.

The mirror. Jacob turned around—and met his own reflection. He and his father had found it in one of the building's huge basement rooms, shrouded in a dusty sheet, amongst old-fashioned furniture and suitcases filled with the forgotten belongings of his mother's family. Once the whole building had belonged to them. One of his mother's ancestors had built it, "manifesting a sinister imagination when designing it" his father would have added. The sculpted faces above the main entrance still frightened Will, staring at every visitor with gold-encrusted eyes.

Jacob moved closer to the mirror. It had been too heavy for the elevator. He could still see the scratches that the frame had left on the walls when three men had carried it up to the seventh floor, swearing and cursing all the way. Jacob had always believed the mirror to be older than anything he had ever seen, despite his father's explanation that mirrors of that size could only be produced after the fifteenth century.

Its glass was as dark as if the night had leaked into it and so wavy one could barely recognize one's own reflection. Jacob touched the thorny rose stems winding across the silver frame, so real the blossoms seemed ready to wilt at any moment. In contrast to the rest of the room the mirror seemed never to gather dust. It hung between the shelves like a shimmering eye, a glassy abyss that cast back a warped reflection of everything John Reckless had left behind: his desk, the antique pistols, his books—and his elder son.

The mirror opens only for he who cannot see himself.

What was the meaning of that?

Jacob closed his eyes. He turned back to the mirror, and felt behind the frame for some kind of lock or latch.

Nothing.

Only his reflection looking him straight in the eye.

It took quite a while before he understood. His hand was barely large enough to cover the distorted reflection of his face. But the cool glass clung to his fingers as if it had been waiting for them, and suddenly the room the mirror showed him was no longer his father's study.

Jacob turned around.

Moonlight fell through a narrow, glassless window onto walls built from gray stone roughly cut. The room they enclosed was round and much bigger than his father's study. The dirty floorboards were covered with acorn shells, and the gnawed bones of birds, and cobwebs hung like veils from the rafters of a pointed roof.

Where was he?

The moonlight painted patterns on Jacob's skin when he walked toward the window. The bloody feathers of a bird stuck to its ledge, and far below he saw scorched walls and black hills with a few lost lights glimmering in the distance. Gone was the sea of houses, the bright streets—everything he knew was gone. And high among the stars were two moons, the smaller one as red as a rusty coin.

Jacob looked back at the mirror, the only thing that hadn't changed. And saw the fear on his face. But fear was an emotion Jacob almost enjoyed. It lured him to dark places, through forbidden doors, and far away from himself. Even the yearning for his father could be drowned in it.

There was no door in the gray walls, just a trapdoor in the floor. When Jacob opened it, he saw what was left of a

burned staircase melting into the darkness below, and for a moment he thought he spotted a tiny figure climbing up the soot-covered remains. But before he could lean through the opening to have a closer look, a rasping sound made him wheel around.

Cobwebs fell down on him as something jumped onto his shoulder. Its hoarse growl sounded like an animal's, but the contorted face, flashing its teeth at his throat, looked as pale and wrinkled as an old man's. The creature—a Stilt as he later learned—was much smaller than Jacob and as spindly as an insect, but terribly strong. Its clothes seemed to be made of cobwebs, its gray hair hung down to its hips, and when Jacob grabbed its thin neck, it sank its yellow teeth deep into his hand. Screaming, he pushed the attacker off his shoulder and stumbled toward the mirror. The spidery creature came after him, licking his blood from its lips, but before it could reach Jacob, he pressed his unharmed hand on the mirror's glass.

Both the scrawny figure and the tower room disappeared, and behind him Jacob once again saw his father's desk.

"Jacob?"

Will's voice barely registered over the beating of his heart. Jacob gasped for air and backed away from the mirror.

"Jake? Are you in there?"

He pulled his sleeve over his mauled hand and opened the door.

Will's eyes were wide with fear. He'd had another bad dream. Little brother. Will followed him like a puppy, and Jacob protected him in the schoolyard and in the park. Sometimes he even managed to forgive Will that their mother loved him more.

"Mom says we shouldn't go in there."

"Since when do I do what Mom says? If you tell on me, I won't take you to the park tomorrow."

Jacob thought he could feel the glass of the mirror like ice on his neck. Will peered past him but quickly lowered his head as Jacob pulled the door shut behind them. Will. Careful where Jacob was rash, tender where he was short-tempered, and calm where he was restless. Jacob took his hand. Will noticed the blood on his fingers and gave him a quizzical look, but Jacob just quietly pulled him back toward his room. What he had found behind the mirror was his.

His alone.

For twelve years that would be the truth. Until the day Jacob would wish he had warned his brother that night of the mirror and of what its dark glass might hold for him. But the night passed and he kept his secret.

Once upon a time… that's how it always begins.